

Pakistan: More than 220 textile workers in Karachi and 25 shoe makers in Lahore died due to fires in factories

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More than 220 textile workers in Karachi and 25 shoe makers in Lahore died due to fires in factories yesterday. This has been the biggest loss of lives of workers due to fire in some decades in Pakistan. The cruel negligence of governments in Sindh and Punjab and also of the federal government has resulted in such a huge loss of lives of the poor of poorest.

Looking at the engulfed with fire factories on television, I could imagine the working conditions inside these factories; with very small working place for each worker, no proper ventilation system, only one exit, no fire safety equipment and full with chemicals. And this horrifying situation still exists in many thousand other small factories in all the big cities of Pakistan. Sindh and Punjab both provinces had ban on labour inspection of factories till last year. Still the labour department officials cannot inspect the factories without prior approval from the employer. And the level of corruption existing in labour departments is another story to deprive workers from their basic rights.

Today the Interior minister Rehman Malik says that FIA will investigate these factory fires. Irony is that government is still not realizing its responsibility of implementing laws with political will which protect of basic rights of the workers including safe working conditions and freedom of association but it wants to investigate it only as another crime. No doubt it is big crime and should be investigated and responsible persons from employers and from governments should be brought to justice but government should show its willingness to implement labour laws with true spirit and should provide tools and trainings to its officials to monitor working places in a better way.

Emergence of these kind of small working place has to do a lot with the economic policies our governments have adopted in last few decades. These policies of neo-liberal globalization have reduced the big and safe working places into small factories through contractualisation and sub-contractualisation. Many big companies and multinational companies are having their products done at these small factories without safe working conditions and without freedom of association.

Labour Education Foundation and its member trade unions are expressing their grief and are showing solidarity with families who lost their loved ones in these incidents. We demand that government should immediately pay Rs. 1 million to each family of dead workers and should bring the responsible persons to justice. Government should also immediately start mapping such dangerous working places all across Pakistan and force employers to make working conditions safe. Government should also curb the mentality of employers who create hurdles to make it impossible for workers to form independent trade unions and raise their voices against such dangerous working conditions.

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